

North Star Nature Preserve Survey – Key Findings (2025 Update)

Visitation and Use Patterns

- A resounding **99% of respondents** reported having visited North Star.
- The most popular activities include: **floating the river (65%), walking/running on the East of Aspen Trail (65%), viewing scenery from Highway 82 (90%)** and **wildlife viewing (52%)**.
- Less frequent but notable activities included **birding, Nordic skiing, e-biking** and **educational programs**.

Visitor Values and Motivations

- Top reasons for visiting: **natural scenery, tranquility** and **wildlife**.
 - **92%** visit to enjoy natural scenery.
 - **78%** for tranquility.
 - **77%** for observing wildlife.
- Only **9%** visit to test physical abilities—highlighting that most visitors are **not seeking an adrenaline or challenge-based recreation experience**, but rather one of quiet enjoyment and immersion in nature.

Access Points and Transportation

- The most-used access points are **Wildwood (57%), East of Aspen Trail (52%)** and **Stillwater Bridge Takeout (45%)**.
- Most float users use **a single vehicle (63%), or bike (46%)** to access the Nature Preserve.
- Timing and Strategy Adjustments: many try to avoid parking issues by timing visits carefully.
 - **84%** plan visits around low-use times: weekdays, early/late season, or off-peak hours.
- Multiple write-in responses emphasized a **desire to limit car traffic and congestion** at key entry points, especially Wildwood.

Satisfaction with Experience

- 4+ Stars: The average visit was rated highly, with **81% describing their experience as “Excellent” or “Very Good.”**
- However, many expressed **growing concern over crowding, overuse and loss of solitude**, especially during peak summer season.

Overcrowding & Peak Season Pressure

- **47%** said the **Wildwood parking area is frequently overcrowded**, along with the **beach area (34%)** and **river corridor (25%)**.
- A visual test using images showed escalating discomfort with increasing crowding:



- **85%** would not feel crowded in Image A (2 PPV).
- By Image C (6PPV), more responded that they would feel crowded (**60%**) than would not (**37%**)
- **91%** felt Image F (12PPV) was too busy.
- This illustrates a clear visitor sensitivity to crowding at about 6 people per viewscape and its impact on experience quality.

Environmental & Wildlife Concerns

- Visitors view **wildlife disturbance, streambank erosion and noise pollution** as serious problems:
 - **46%** believe wildlife disturbance is a big problem.

- **43%** flagged **audible music** as a problem and **29%** raised **human alterations to beaver dams**.
- **Compaction/erosion, human waste** and **vegetation trampling** are also moderate to major concerns.

Strong Support for Current Management Strategies

- Survey participants **overwhelmingly support** a range of river management tools currently in use:
 - **91%** support **required training** for commercial guides.
 - **90%** support **limiting commercial group size**.
 - **88%** support limiting the number of commercial groups per hour.
 - **84%** support **environmental education** for all commercial users.
 - **80%** support **zero-tolerance policies for dogs and loud music**.
- There's also **support for voluntary closures** during sensitive periods (wildlife activity or low flows).

Clear Preference for Conservation Over Recreation

- When asked about desired conditions:
 - **87%** said it's **very important** that North Star provides **effective wildlife habitat**.
 - **82%** value the **Preserve's role in protecting water flow**.
 - **79%** prioritize **healthy riparian areas**.
- Only **47%** rated access to river recreation as “very important,” the lowest of all desired conditions—indicating **public preference for prioritizing ecological integrity** over recreational convenience.

Mixed Views on Personal Use Regulation

- While **63%** support **river group size limits** and **45%** support **requiring ecological education for private users**, there is more variation in opinions about:
 - Limiting access through **permits or timed-entry systems** (31% agree, 35% disagree or are unsure).

- Imposing **paid reservations or parking**—which drew less support than free, educationally oriented approaches.
- The respondents agree **more on conservation strategies and education than regulation of recreational river use through pricing or restriction.**

Commercial Use: Restrict or Maintain


- A **majority (56%) want to further restrict commercial use**, while **32% prefer to maintain the current level.**
- Only **4%** support increasing it.
- Many open-ended comments emphasized the **commercialization of the preserve as contradictory to conservation values.**
- Respondents advocated for:
 - **Caps on total commercial user days.**
 - **Stronger enforcement and monitoring.**
 - **Greater emphasis on local and educational use.**

A Vision for the Future

- Overall, survey responses reflect a **shared desire to protect the natural character of North Star, manage human impacts thoughtfully** and ensure the preserve remains a **refuge for wildlife and a sanctuary for quiet nature-based recreation.**

Feedback Themes from Open Comments


1. Strong Public Support for Habitat Protection

 Preserve wildlife and sensitive riparian ecosystems.


Many respondents emphasized that the preserve's original purpose was to protect wildlife and fragile riparian habitat—not to serve as a recreational hotspot. There is deep concern that ecological integrity is being compromised.

“This is a nature preserve, not a water park.”

2. Opposition to Commercial Use


 A significant number of comments call for either **banning** or **strictly limiting** commercial river operations.

3. Concerns About Overuse and "Water Park" Atmosphere

 There is consistent feedback that the preserve has become too crowded, noisy and feels more like an amusement park than a nature preserve. Many associate this degradation with unregulated or excessive river use.


“It feels like Disneyland, not a sanctuary.”

4. Favor for "Rewilding" and Beaver Habitat Restoration

 Dozens expressed support for "rewilding" North Star, returning it to a more natural, wetland-dominated state and enhancing conditions for beavers, birds, moose and other species. Several respondents particularly support efforts to maintain beavers, recognizing their ecological value and role in fire mitigation.


“Beavers belong here!”

5. Divided Views on Permits and Access Management

 While some support permits to manage crowding, others—especially locals—worry that permit systems would limit spontaneous access and disproportionately impact residents over tourists.


“Don’t turn this into another Hanging Lake.”

6. Locals vs. Tourists Tension

 Strong sentiment to **prioritize respectful local users**. Many comments reflect a desire to **prioritize local access**, citing that residents care more for the area and are more likely to behave responsibly, while tourists often disrespect rules and habitat.


“Let locals float without jumping through hoops.”

7. Requests for Better Enforcement and Education

 More rules, more rangers, stronger consequences. Respondents repeatedly called for stronger enforcement of rules (e.g., no dogs, no music, limited group size) and better public education to encourage stewardship over consumption.

“Education isn’t enough—enforce the rules.”

8. Desire for Non-Motorized and Low-Impact Access

 Bike, walk, or shuttle access preferred over more parking. There is broad support for bike and walk-in access, shuttle systems and discouraging car access—especially to reduce parking pressure and environmental degradation.

“Keep it wild, not widened.”

9. Appreciation for OST Staff

🙌 Amid critiques, many thanked Open Space and Trails staff for their efforts and acknowledged positive changes like infrastructure upgrades and increased ranger presence.

“You’re doing important work—thank you!”

10. Misinformation and Adaptive Management

📄 Respect the **conservation intent** and legal protections. Some suggest that recreation management and current commercial use violates the 2002 conservation easement, indicating there is widespread misunderstanding of the original conservation easement, the 2000 management plan and the intent of adaptive management planning updates.

“Keep North Star a refuge, not a revenue stream.”